



The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa: a historiographic debate

Dario Miccoli

To cite this article: Dario Miccoli (2020): The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa: a historiographic debate, Middle Eastern Studies

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2020.1723082>



Published online: 12 Feb 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa: a historiographic debate

Dario Miccoli

Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy

Georges Bensoussan, *Jews in Arab Countries: the Great Uprooting* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein (eds), *The Holocaust and North Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

Lior B. Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

Over the last twenty years, Sephardi and Mizrahi Studies have grown significantly and have led to the publication of new and innovative works that investigated understudied aspects of Middle Eastern and North African Jewish history, identity and culture. The three works that I will discuss, illustrate very well some of the approaches through which scholars are tackling these subjects, and how differently the history of these Jewries can be narrated. All are ambitious books that, regardless if one agrees or not with the author's conclusions, stimulate important reflections on the modern Middle East and North Africa and, even more so, on the Jews that lived in the region. This is why, before turning to the discussion of the books, it is worth saying a few words on the historical background from where they take cue.

As well-known, up until the 1950s the southern shore of the Mediterranean hosted a thriving Jewish population. On the eve of the 1948 war, around 285,000 Jews lived in Morocco; 140,000 in Algeria; 110,000 in Tunisia; 38,000 in Libya; 75,000 in Egypt; 20,000 in Lebanon and finally around 80,000 in Turkey.¹ Some had lived there since antiquity, others had settled in North Africa or in cities of the Ottoman Empire like Salonika, Smyrna and Istanbul after the 1492 expulsion from the Iberian peninsula. Still others had moved from southern Europe to port cities like Alexandria and Beirut mainly for economic reasons in the course of the nineteenth century. The Napoleonic expedition to Egypt in 1798 and then, in the following century, colonialism, strengthened the ties between the Jews of the two shores of the Mediterranean sea. Even before then, however, those living in the eastern Mediterranean and in North Africa had been in contact with the Jews of southern Europe in particular.² Some worked as tradesmen, acting as mediators between the local authorities and foreign powers and for this reason obtained a European nationality.³ During the late Ottoman period, many experienced the passage from a more traditional societal model still connected to the *millet* system to a modern one, at the top of which stood a Westernised and well-off elite.

That said, Jewish life in the region was not always easy. For example, in 1840 an infamous case of blood libel accusation – the Damascus affair – took place in Syria. Other cases happened in Alexandria (1881) and Corfu (1891). They were often due, on the one hand, to the socio-economic rivalries that opposed the Jews to local Greek-Orthodox communities and, on the

other, to the blending of traditional Islamic anti-Jewish attitudes with European antisemitic stereotypes.⁴ Around the same years, in 1894, France saw the outbreak of one of the most infamous cases of antisemitism of nineteenth-century Europe, the Dreyfus affair. The virulent campaign that followed had an impact on the French colonial empire, particularly on Algeria. However, it was only with the diffusion of more exclusionary forms of Arab nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s and then of Fascist ideas, together with the worsening of Arab-Jewish relations in Palestine, that antisemitism started to impact on the southern Mediterranean Jews in a more threatening manner. Furthermore, the antisemitic legislation enacted by Fascist Italy in 1938 and then by Vichy France in 1941 were also applied to Jews living in the colonies of Libya – under Italian colonial rule since 1912 – and in French North Africa.⁵

Up until the 1940s, Zionist activities only interested a small number of Jews – also as a consequence of the assimilationist ideology promoted by the French Jewish philanthropic and educational institution *Alliance Israélite Universelle*.⁶ However, with the fall of the Ottoman Empire (1918), the Jews were no longer part of an inter-ethnic empire, but of nation-states increasingly built around an Arab Muslim identity. Whereas many preferred not to be directly involved in national politics, especially from the 1920s and 1930s some did turn to Arab nationalist movements or to Socialism and Communism. From the late 1920s, as the migration of Jews to British Palestine increased, so the relations between Jews and Arabs worsened. This and the radicalisation of the political arena in the 1930s, and the growing relevance of Islamic movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, led to an increased socio-political marginalisation of the Jews.

The Second World War and the Holocaust determined the decline of entire Mediterranean Jewish communities that dated back to the early modern era, for instance those of Salonika and Rhodes. As for North Africa, some Jews living in areas like Libya and Tunisia – under direct German occupation for a few months, between 1942 and 1943 – were deported to Nazi concentration camps, whereas others were interned and died in camps located in Algeria and elsewhere in the Maghreb.⁷ Nonetheless, it was only with the birth of the State of Israel in 1948, the rise of pan-Arabism in the 1950s and the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli conflict, that the situation truly deteriorated. Then, a very difficult period – which resulted in expulsions and/or (forced) migrations – started for all the Jews of North Africa and the Middle East. Those who moved to Israel were to face harsh years in order to adjust to the new homeland and, pejoratively classified as *Mizrahim*, long remained on the margins of the state. Others resettled in Europe – especially France, Britain and to a lesser extent Italy – or in the US, Canada and even Australia and Latin America.

It is against this background that Georges Bensoussan wrote a study that takes into account the modern history of all the Jews of the Arab world, from Morocco to Iraq. First published in French in 2012, *Jews in Arab Lands: the Great Uprooting* aspires to go beyond those studies and scholars who ‘think in idyllic terms about the Judeo-Arab past’ on the one hand, and those that propose ‘a lachrymose history composed entirely of suffering’ on the other.⁸ The idea of writing a general history of the Jewish communities of the Arab world is worth praising, even though there were already a few of such works at our disposal: I am thinking for example of Norman Stillman’s *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times*, *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, edited by Michael Laskier together with other scholars or, from a different perspective, *Histoire des relations entre Juifs et musulmans* by Benjamin Stora and Abdelwahab Meddeb.⁹ Clearly, writing such a history is not an easy task since we are talking of sometimes very different Jewish groups – from the Westernised Jews of turn-of-the-century Cairo to the ‘mountain Jews’ of the Moroccan Atlas – and it is difficult for a single researcher to master the sources, bibliography and languages needed in order to work on the whole region.

Jews in Arab Lands starts with a first part on ‘The Gradual Erosion of Tradition, 1850-1914’ that portrays the process of modernisation that many North African and Middle Eastern Jews went through in the nineteenth century and during the colonial period, also thanks to the intervention of educational institutions like the above-mentioned *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. A

second part, dedicated to 'The Disintegration of a World, 1914-1975', then follows: it is divided into a section on 'The Echo of the Great War, 1914-1939' and another on 'Shock and Collapse, 1939-1975'. In these sections, Bensoussan conducts a *tour d'horizon* by describing the distancing between Jews and Arabs in the interwar years and during the initial phase of Arab nationalism, that then culminated with the mass departure of almost all the Jews after the Second World War and in the 1950s. Bensoussan claims that 'a strange silence surrounds the history of the Jews of the Middle East', and therefore his is an attempt to counter such silence.¹⁰ If this may be true at the level of the general public, it cannot be said anymore for the scientific (or even literary) production. As already mentioned, the last twenty years have seen the publication of scholarly works that portray the North African and Middle Eastern Jewish past from a variety of points of view, most of which are however never mentioned by the author. I am thinking particularly of the studies of historians like Joel Beinin, Orit Bashkin, Yaron Harel, Yaron Tsur, Joshua Schreier, Lital Levy, Zvi Zohar and of sociologists and anthropologists such as Ella Shohat, Sami Shalom-Chetrit, Yehudah Shenhav, Aziza Khazzoom, Harvey Goldberg, Michèle Baussant and many others.¹¹ Bensoussan's book does not take these authors and the scholarly debate to which they are contributing into any consideration, and is largely based on important but, by now, perhaps outdated works like Bernard Lewis's *The Jews of Islam* (1984) or the studies on Moroccan Jews that Doris Bensimon-Donath conducted in the late 1960s.

Throughout the book, the author espouses the idea, put forward by Bernard Lewis among others, that 'the few benefits that Jews in Arab lands enjoyed prior to independence were solely the result of the deeds of Europeans' and of European Jewish institutions like, first and foremost, the above-cited *Alliance Israélite Universelle*.¹² If the merits of the *Alliance* for educating generations of Jewish boys and girls in the Arab world cannot be disputed, saying that no improvement in the status of the Jews came from local powers and societies – or that the *dhimma* always remained the main juridical and mental framework through which the Arab Muslim world looked at Jews – constitutes a reduction of a much more nuanced situation. Aside from the fact that in the Ottoman lands the *dhimma*, an Islamic legal category to denote and regulate the status of non-Muslim minorities like Jews and Christians, was officially abolished in the mid-nineteenth century, it is difficult to encapsulate in one same conclusion all the very different contexts in which the Jews of the region lived.¹³ If in the case of Yemen, Bensoussan's statement probably is valid, in others – like Egypt, Tunisia or cities like Istanbul, Baghdad and Smyrna – the Jews were an integral component of the late Ottoman and post-Ottoman society and took part in politics both at local and national level, and in the 1940s and 1950s also contributed to the formation of Middle Eastern leftist and anti-colonial movements together with their Muslim and Christian compatriots.¹⁴

Bensoussan argues that 'for the immense majority of Muslims', as opposed to Jews, 'modernization was an evil force carried into the country by a long-hostile invading adversary'.¹⁵ But even in this case, his statement overlooks important works of political and social history that appeared at least in the last ten years, or in some cases even much earlier than that, that investigated Arab approaches to modernity and liberalism. Drawing upon classics like Albert Hourani's *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* – first published in 1962 – the recent books of historians like Jens Hanssen, Keith Watenpaugh, Aline Schlaepfer, Max Weiss and Ussama Makdisi, clarified how in the late Ottoman world an ecumenical frame between Muslims, Jews and Christians could be found. It was a space where, from the second half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, a surely ambivalent yet also vital path towards a non-sectarian Arab world was beginning to surface: think, in the Jewish case, of intellectuals like the Egyptians Murad Farag and Georges Cattai, or the Lebanese Esther Azhari Moyal.¹⁶

Finally, Bensoussan argues that 'the end of these [Jewish] communities' was due not only to contingent social, political and economic factors but also to more profound ones. In fact, that of the Jews in the modern Arab world 'was exclusion that in certain cases closely resembles a policy of ethnic cleansing'. As an example, he refers to Egypt saying that in this country in the

1950s a 'deliberate expulsion' of the Jews took place.¹⁷ If it is correct that at the time of the Suez war (1956) and actually even before that, a number of Jews holding Egyptian citizenship or who were stateless, and later on who were British or French nationals – Britain and France being at war against Egypt – were expelled, there was never an Egyptian decree that forced *all* the Jews *qua* Jews to leave the country.¹⁸ Moreover, the nationalist policies enacted more or less since the late 1930s and then especially after Nasser's 1952 Revolution, often implied anti-colonial, as well as anti-Western and anti-Zionist attitudes difficult to distinguish.¹⁹ This is not to downplay the tragic consequences that all that has been mentioned had for the Jews of Egypt, and similar things could be said for other Jewries in the region, but more modestly is a *caveat* in order to write their history in a factual manner, adopting a more global view on complex subjects that cannot be reduced to a history of oppression and inferiority.

The Holocaust and North Africa, a collection of studies edited by Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, approaches the history of the Jews of the Maghreb from a different perspective and by focusing on a still neglected topic: the impact of the Holocaust and the Second World War on North Africa. The book is divided into four parts: the first three include case studies on specific aspects of the history of North Africa, as well as of North African Jews and their encounter with the war, whereas the fourth part is more theory- and methodology-oriented. As the editors explain in the introduction, 'this book offers a series of North African histories of the Holocaust – the emphasis being on the Holocaust *and* North Africa'.²⁰ This is not to say that the Holocaust does not have a North African history, but that the former should be understood in a careful manner, unravelling the connections between it and the war more generally, as well as with Fascism and colonialism, instead of imposing on North Africa a purely European reading of the Holocaust. This way, looking at the event from the perspective of Algeria or Tunisia becomes an opportunity for redrawing its boundaries, as well as for rethinking its legacies in the post-war period.

The first part of the book is dedicated to the intersection between colonialism and Fascism in North Africa: Daniel J. Schroeter, a well-known scholar of Moroccan Jewry, focuses on Vichy's anti-Semitic legislation in North Africa; Jens Hoppe on the persecution of the Jews in Italian Libya between 1938 – the year in which the Italian racial laws were promulgated – and 1945. Ruth Ginio presents an interesting analysis of how the Vichy laws were implemented in French colonies where almost no Jew lived, like French West Africa. The second part deals with internment camps and experiences of occupation. The chapter by Susan Slyomovics discusses internment camps where Jews, among others, were confined in Algeria; that by Aomar Boum and Mohammed Hatimi focuses on the Jews of rural Morocco during the war and the one by Daniel Lee goes back to the issue of anti-Jewish legislation, taking Tunisia as a case-study. The third part is composed of three chapters: the first, again by Aomar Boum, is on a Saharan labour camp during Vichy times; the second opts for a literary perspective, thanks to which Lia Brozgal presents Judeo-Tunisian narratives of occupation. The third and last by Alma Heckman provides a thorough analysis of Moroccan Jewish Communists during the Second World War. As said above, the fourth section – with six essays by prominent scholars who work in the field of Middle East and/or Holocaust Studies, like Susan Gilson Miller, Michael Rothberg and Omer Bartov – aims at reflecting on the rationale of the book, the scholarly paths taken and not taken, and how 'Holocaust' and 'North Africa' might intersect.

In their introduction, the two editors are attentive to the differences between the various countries and even within a single country, so as not to give a unified picture of such a complex chapter in North African history. Moreover, they recognise how certain aspects still await further scrutiny: for example, there is still much to be discovered when it comes to North African Jews deported to concentration camps from France or other European countries, or about Jewish resistance in North Africa (think of the famous Operation Torch in 1942 Algeria). As Aomar and Boum, and Bensoussan too in *Jews in Arab Countries*, acknowledge, the last few years have seen an increasing interest in Israel – but also in Europe and the US – for North African and Middle

Eastern Jewish history and memory. So, the study of the North African Jewish history of the Holocaust might be a way to strengthen that interest and make it even more central in the contemporary Jewish, and Israeli, memory. From a scholarly point of view, one could say that focusing more than before on this issue will help us see this event in another light and from a 'marginal', yet revealing, position that, in the end, will contribute to clarifying it more generally.²¹ Moreover, it is obvious that the 'globalisation' of the Holocaust and the fact that it has become a blueprint for almost any genocide or trauma, makes it an unavoidable point of reference even for those Jews that did not experience it directly – like many Jews of the Arab world. This is even truer for the Israelis of Middle Eastern and North African origin, confronted with the weight that the Holocaust has in contemporary Israeli identity. But at the same time, as the editors acknowledge, this should not lead to the argument that all the Jews of the Arab world suffered from the Holocaust or from Nazi-style persecution, thus comparing the former to different events like the *farhud* – the anti-Jewish riots that erupted in Baghdad in 1941.²²

In this respect, the chapter by Susan Gilson Miller is particularly enlightening. Miller cites Dan Michmann, one of the most eminent historians of the Holocaust, who argued that 'Sephardi Jews of North Africa were exempt from the threat of genocide and therefore were not victims in the European sense'. But at the same time, she notes how for these Jews 'living in the shadow of the Nazi threat and enduring the daily insults, stresses and anxieties of Vichy oppression, was a psychological nightmare'.²³ Michael Rothberg further notes that this volume not only adds 'new spaces to the history of the Holocaust', but contributes to 'a more concrete understanding of the interaction of fascism and colonialism and the place of Jewish and Muslim communities within that dynamic'.²⁴ This last point is of great relevance, because it shows the hegemonic logic that lay beneath colonialism and the directions it took during the war. It explains also the dynamics of the postwar period and the rapid worsening of Arab-Jewish relations during decolonisation: a time of liberation and independence for the Arab Muslim majority, one of emigration, spoliation and violence for Jews. Whether we call it 'the great uprooting' – to quote the subtitle of Bensoussan's work – or utilise more neutral definitions, we are always talking about the movement of hundreds of thousands of people who in most cases were forced to leave their country of birth because of a variety of political, ideological, religious and economic reasons that however all had to do with their being Jewish and not Muslim or Christian Arabs.

In the end, the question whether a North African Holocaust exists remains unanswered, or better to say is answered in multiple ways. If one looks at episodes of deportation, or at the number of deportees, it is arguable that the Holocaust only impacted on some Jews of North Africa, mainly the Libyans, and was indeed quite a marginal episode in the history of the Second World War. Nonetheless, the fact that this subject – barely studied for decades, if we except pioneering works like Michel Abitbol's *Les Juifs d'Afrique du Nord sous Vichy* (1983) and a few others – has now attracted the interest of historians and also of state institutions in Israel and elsewhere, tells something of the direction in which Holocaust Studies are going, and of the intersections that history, memory and memory politics are taking today.

The third and last book, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran* by Lior B. Sternfeld, tackles another subject that is rarely addressed, but nonetheless is at the centre of the contemporary Middle Eastern scenario: the relations between Iran, the Jews and Israel, or more accurately how Iranian Jews navigated between their native country and 'Zion' during the reign of Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979). After situating his book in the field of Iranian and Iranian Jewish Studies, Sternfeld begins by telling the story of the migration of a number of Iraqi and Ashkenazi Jews to Iran in the 1940s. If these newcomers contributed to shift Iranian Jewish demographics, their (forgotten) history can show the relevant role that Iran played during the Second World War and the help given by Iranian Jews to coreligionists from other parts of the world.²⁵ The second chapter moves to the political sphere, focusing on the role of the Communist Tudeh Party in the 1950s, its Jewish members and the political engagement of the Jewish community through the press. In fact, Iranian Jews were not so dissimilar from other

Jews of the region, like the Iraqis or Egyptians – who, as already said, also played a role in the development of the local Communist and Socialist parties. Sternfeld dedicates the third chapter to Zionism and Israel, illustrating the complex relationship that the Jews of Iran had first with this ideology and then with the Jewish state. Again, as in the case of many other Middle Eastern Jewish communities, Zionism initially attracted a very small number of people. That said, Sternfeld notes how up until the 1970s, prior to the advent of the Islamic Republic, Israel and Iran had quite good relations both in economic and cultural terms. The fourth chapter arrives at today, trying to understand the political upheavals that Iran has gone through since 1979 through the eyes of those Jews who decided to stay in Tehran and who, against all odds, still constitute the largest Jewish community living in a Middle Eastern country other than Israel.

Between Iran and Zion is a deeply original work that aims to reinscribe Iranian Jews in the social and political history of their country of birth and not to see them as a segregated community. In this sense, it goes against Bensoussan's assertion that the fusion between Jews and Muslims mainly occurred 'in daily life – in music, literature, cooking, and handicrafts'.²⁶ Sternfeld argues against this and much of the existing historiography on the Jews of Iran, that posits that the former 'abstained from participating in national political events such as the 1979 revolution'.²⁷ By describing the existence of Jews in Iran as characterised almost exclusively by episodes of persecution and discrimination, this historiography treated them as an 'isolated community... one that rarely interacted with the broader Iranian society'.²⁸ While Sternfeld's approach is certainly laudable, the opposite risk – that is, taking cases like that of the Jews involved in the Tudeh Party as indicative of trends that can be applied to the entirety of Iranian Jews – exists too. It is undeniable that Iran constitutes, at least partly, an exception in the history of *déracinement* that the Jews of the Middle East went through from the late 1940s. Think of the influx of Jews from Poland and Iraq in that period, or – as mentioned – the nowadays unthinkable relations that the Pahlavi monarchy had with Israel. Nevertheless, the conclusions of *Between Iran and Zion* in some ways offer a slightly too optimistic reading of Iranian Jewish life. Could one then agree with Bensoussan, when – reflecting upon Jewish life in the Middle East in the second half of the twentieth century – he asked, 'What [were] the promises for the future worth of, when, almost everywhere, Arab nationalism (particularly in the Near East) show[ed] the signs of an ethnicisation that will not leave any space for Jews?'²⁹

In fact, if we look at numbers, even in the case of Iran, during the Pahlavi era about 100,000 Jews lived in the country. The community decreased to 50-60,000 after the Islamic Revolution and nowadays should be around 10,000 according to the latest Iranian census. Here the figures become contradictory, because Sternfeld contends that 25,000 Jews still live in Iran, based on what Iranian authorities have claimed in recent years. According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, there would be instead about 12,000–15,000 Jews. What seems undoubted is that in Iran Jewish life has declined greatly and that – even if most of the Jews who left the country went to the US or Europe, and not to Israel – the advent of the Islamic Republic did constitute a negative watershed. For this reason and despite the fact that this is not the focus of *Between Iran and Zion*, it would have been interesting to read a bit more information on those Iranian Jews who, from the 1950s onwards, left the country and how and if they kept in touch with the motherland and the Jews still living there.³⁰

Taken together, these three very different volumes testify to the vitality of the field of Sephardi and Mizrahi Studies, as well as the divergent paths scholars are taking to reconstruct the history of the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa. If for the editors of *The Holocaust and North Africa* and for the author of *Between Iran and Zion*, the time of grand narratives has come to an end – last but not least because of the great heterogeneity of the Middle Eastern Jewish diasporas and the difficulty of writing an overarching history from Morocco to Iran – Bensoussan's *Jews in Arab Countries* still wishes to find a *fil rouge* to explain the end of centuries-old Jewries in such a short timespan. Secondly, whereas Bensoussan seems to believe in the existence of one model of Jewish modernity, namely the post-Emancipation and European/

Western one, Sternfeld and Aomar and Boum suggest that other approaches can be discerned looking at Iran or North Africa.

These books show how especially the twentieth-century history of the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa has become an intellectual *champ de bataille*, to use in another perspective the formula coined by Enzo Traverso for the historiographic debates on twentieth-century Europe. As Traverso noted, the writing of history not only never is a neutral act, but nowadays is driven by a reification of the past in which memory and memory politics play a central role.³¹ This is true even in the case of the Jews of the Islamic world who are often trapped between opposing and irreconcilable narratives: one of cultural symbiosis and proximity, another of estrangement and violence. This is what Bensoussan too contends, even though in the end his is a history that highlights almost only the negative aspects of the Middle Eastern and North African Jewish past. As already mentioned, for this author the twentieth-century history of Jewish presence in the region 'can only be understood by accepting that it is the culmination of the long practice of the *dhimma*'.³² But if the cultural and ideological legacy of the *dhimma* certainly did not vanish overnight with the Ottoman decree that abolished it in 1856, it is dubious that this was the most crucial factor influencing the relations between Jews and Muslims up to the early or mid-twentieth century. Colonialism, radical Islamic ideas, pan-Arabism, Zionism and the Arab-Israeli conflict, economic rivalries and other issues all contributed to the deterioration of the relations between Jews and their neighbours. Moreover, as Sternfeld and other scholars underline, Middle Eastern and North African Jewish history should be understood in conjunction with that of the other inhabitants of the region, as well as with that of other exiles and *rapatriés*.³³

It is interesting to see how for Boum, Stein and Sternfeld, the twentieth century did not necessarily constitute the final episode of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish history, but a surely ambiguous yet new era during which, in some cases, it was possible to imagine approaches to nationhood and inter-ethnic relations different from those that then prevailed. For this reason, *The Holocaust and North Africa* and *Between Iran and Zion* stress the many contact zones between Jews, Muslims and others – and in doing so, contribute to a growing body of works that sees the Middle Eastern (Jewish) past as constellated of lost opportunities and paths not taken. On the other hand, *Jews in Arab Countries* underlines the cleavages and ruptures that seem to Bensoussan inherent to the region and to Islam. This divergence first depends, I would say, on the sources utilised by the three books: in the case of Bensoussan, much of the sources come – as mentioned earlier – from diplomatic archives and the archive of the *Alliance*. While important and utilised by any Jewish historian of the region, this kind of documentary evidence does not always allow one to fully grasp the voices of the people who lived there. Rather, we hear those of the colonial administrators or of the *Alliance* teachers and, through them, the voices of the Jews of the Arab world. The other two volumes take advantage of a more diverse range of sources that includes the press, community archives, literature, oral histories and altogether constitute what Sarah Stein defined as 'the multi-sited archives' of the North African and Middle Eastern Jewish past. This way, we get a more comprehensive portrayal of the 'thick histories' of these Jewries, putting aside 'dramatic monocausal narratives'.³⁴

Aside from the difference of sources, the three volumes stem from different cultural and national contexts: the US in the case of Boum, Stein and Sternfeld and France in that of Bensoussan. The impression is that this played a role too, either in embracing or rejecting certain historiographic narratives. Think of the heated contemporary French public debate on the increase of antisemitism in France – a phenomenon, recalled by Bensoussan in his conclusions, that has a long genesis and has to do with much more than radical Islam and the rise of Muslim antisemitism, even though for sure these are not marginal aspects.³⁵ This is clear when reading *The Holocaust and North Africa*, which is based on nuanced *jeux d'échelles* showing how French North Africa and the Jews who lived in places like Tunis, Algiers – many of whom migrated to

France in the 1950s – are imbricated in both local and global histories, in Jewish dynamics and in others that have to do with the Muslim majority and the colonial powers.³⁶

The historiography on the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa, as it comes out from these three books, mirrors the diverse and at times painful past of this region and its people, while shedding light on the many stories and characters that waited a long time – and in some cases still are waiting – to be exposed. At the same time, we are confronted with divergent historiographic paths which, in some cases, seem driven by preoccupations that have to do with the present – and the current relations between Jews and Europe, Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians – more than the past. What, as historians, we should ultimately hope for is a narrative that – as Lior Sternfeld and Menashe Anzi pointed out in an essay recently published in the Israeli daily *Ha-Aretz* – pays justice to the richness and complexity of the Middle Eastern Jewish worlds, ‘a reality that was neither good or bad exclusively, but one that included both aspects, and was characterised by complicated relationships with the majority population, with other minorities, and with the local and imperial political structures. This is the nature of all history.’³⁷

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. See Reeva Spector Simon, Michael Laskier and Sara Reguer (eds), *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
2. Aron Rodrigue, ‘L’exportation du paradigme révolutionnaire. Son influence sur le judaïsme sépharade et oriental’ in Pierre Birnbaum (ed.), *Histoire politique des Juifs de France* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1990), pp.221–43. See also Mathias B. Lehmann, ‘A Livornese “Port Jew” and the Sephardim of the Ottoman Empire’, *Jewish Social Studies* Vol.11, No.2 (2005), pp.51–76.
3. Denise Charbit, ‘L’historiographie du décret Crémieux: le retour du refoulé’ in Joëlle Allouche-Benayoun and Geneviève Dermenjian (eds), *Les Juifs d’Algérie, une histoire de ruptures* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2015), pp.43–61.
4. Jonathan Fraenkel, *The Damascus Affair, “Ritual Murder”, Politics, and the Jews in 1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Jacob Landau, ‘Ritual Murder Accusations in Nineteenth-Century Egypt’ in Jacob Landau (ed.), *Middle Eastern Themes: Papers in History and Politics* (London: Frank Cass, 1973), pp.99–142 and Dario Miccoli, *Histories of the Jews of Egypt: An Imagined Bourgeoisie, 1880s–1950s* (London: Routledge, 2015), esp. pp.54–61.
5. Michael Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century: the Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria* (New York: New York University Press, 1994).
6. Michael Laskier, ‘Aspects of the Activities of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in the Jewish Communities of the Middle East and North Africa: 1860–1918’, *Modern Judaism*, Vol.3, No.2 (1983), pp.147–71; Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition. The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle* (Portland: University of Washington Press, 2003) and André Kaspi (ed.), *Histoire de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle de 1860 à nos jours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010). On Zionism, Michael Laskier, ‘The Evolution of Zionist Activity in the Jewish Communities of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria: 1897–1947’, *Studies in Zionism*, Vol.4, No.2 (1983), pp.205–36.
7. See the monographic issue on *Les Juifs d’Orient face au nazisme et à la Shoah* of the *Revue d’histoire de la Shoah*, 2 (2016). On Morocco, Yaron Tsur, *Qehillah qru’ah: yehudei-Maroco ve-ha-le’umiyut 1943–1954* [‘A torn community: the Jews of Morocco and nationalism 1943–1954’] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2001), pp.15–74 [Hebrew].
8. Georges Bensoussan, *Jews in Arab Countries: the Great Uprooting* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), p.3.
9. Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2003); Simon, Laskier and Reguer (eds), *The Jews of the Middle East*; Benjamin Stora and Abdelwahab Meddeb, *Histoire des relations entre juifs et musulmans* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2013).
10. Bensoussan, *Jews*, p.1.
11. The list is extensive and here I can refer only to a few among the most important works such as Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford

- University Press, 2012); Yaron Harel, *Syrian Jewry in Transition 1840–1880* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2010); Joshua Schreier, *Arabs of the Jewish Faith: the Civilizing Mission in Colonial Algeria* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Lital Levy, 'Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the *Mashriq*', *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 98/4 (2008), pp.452–69; Zvi Zohar, *Rabbinic Creativity in the Modern Middle East* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Yaron Tsur, *Qehillah qru'ah* [Hebrew]. For the social sciences, Yehudah Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Ella Shohat, 'Rupture and Return: Zionist Discourse and the Study of Arab Jews', *Social Text*, Vol.21, No.2 (2003), pp.49–74; Ella Shohat, 'Sephardim in Israel: Zionism From the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victim', *Social Text*, Vol.19–20 (1988), pp.1–35; Ella Shohat, 'The Invention of the Mizrahim', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol.29, No.1 (1999), pp.5–20; Sami Shalom-Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews* (London: Routledge, 2010); Aziza Khazzoom, *Shifting Ethnic Boundaries and Inequality in Israel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Harvey Goldberg, *Jewish Life in Muslim Libya: Rivals and Relatives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Michèle Baussant, "'Etrangers sans rémission?": Être juif d'Égypte', *Ethnologie française*, Vol.43, No.4 (2013), pp.671–8.
12. Bensoussan, *Jews*, p.153.
 13. Here, I direct to Claude Cahen, 'Dhimma', in Bernard Lewis, Charles Pellat, Joseph Schacht and Charles E. Bosworth (eds), *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, vol. II (Leiden: Brill, 1977), pp.234–38. See also Heather Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
 14. See Robert Watson, 'Between Liberation(s) and Occupation(s): Reconsidering the Emergence of Maghrebi Jewish Communism, 1942–1945', *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, Vol.13, No.3 (2014), pp.381–98; Pierre-Jean Le Foll Luciani, *Les juifs algériens dans la lutte anticoloniale. Trajectoires dissidentes (1934–1965)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016); Rami Ginat, *A History of Egyptian Communism: Jews and their Compatriots in Quest of Revolution* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2011); Beinín, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*, pp.143–78; Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians*, pp.141–82.
 15. Bensoussan, *Jews*, p.100.
 16. See Jens Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Keith D. Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: the Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019) and Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (eds), *Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age: Towards An Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Aline Schlaepfer, *Les intellectuels juifs de Bagdad. Discours et allégeances (1908–1951)* (Leiden: Brill, 2016) and lastly Lital Levy, 'Mihu yehudi-aravi? 'lyun meshaveh be-toldot ha-she'elah, 1880–2010' ['Who is an Arab Jew? A comparative historical analysis of the question, 1880–2010'], *Te'oríah u-viqoret*, 38–39 (2011), pp.101–35 [Hebrew] and Dario Miccoli, 'A Fragile Cradle: Writing Jewishness, Nationhood and Modernity in Cairo, 1920–1940', *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol.21, No.3 (2016), pp.1–29.
 17. Bensoussan, *Jews*, pp.452–3.
 18. On the Jews of Egypt, Gudrun Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt 1914–1952* (London: IB Tauris, 1989); Michael Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt 1920–1970: In the Midst of Zionism, Anti-Semitism and the Middle East Conflict* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Beinín, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry* and Miccoli, *Histories of the Jews of Egypt*.
 19. See Nancy Reynolds, *A City Consumed: Urban Commerce, the Cairo Fire, and the Politics of Decolonization in Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
 20. Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein (eds), *The Holocaust and North Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), p.12.
 21. Lawrence Rosen, 'Victims Enough? The Jews of North Africa During the Holocaust', *Jewish Review of Books*, Spring 2019, available at <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/5186/victim-enough-the-jews-of-north-africa-during-the-holocaust/>.
 22. Batya Shimony, 'Holocaust Envy: Globalization of the Holocaust in the Israeli Discourse' in Amos Goldberg and Haim Hazan (eds), *Marking Evil: Holocaust Memory in the Global Age* (Berghann: New York, 2015), pp.296–317. The *farhud* (Arabic: 'violent spoliation, attack') is the name given to the anti-Jewish riots that occurred in Baghdad in 1941, when 180 Jews were killed and more than 1000 injured, and Jewish properties and shops robbed. See Moshe Gat, *The Jewish Exodus From Iraq, 1948–1951* (London: Frank Cass, 1997). For a more critical discussion of the event, Shenhav, *The Arab Jews*, p.140 and after.
 23. Susan Gilson Miller, *Sephardim and Holocaust Historiography* in Boum and Stein (eds), *The Holocaust*, p.228.
 24. Michael Rothberg, *A Memory That Is Not One* in Boum and Stein (eds), *The Holocaust*, p.243.
 25. On this, see Lior B. Sternfeld, "'Poland Is Not Lost While We Still Live": The Making of Polish Iran, 1941–45', *Jewish Social Studies*, 23/3 (2018), pp.101–27.
 26. Bensoussan, *Jews*, p.99.
 27. Lior B. Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), p.8.

28. Ibid., p.2.
29. Georges Bensoussan, 'Editorial', *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah*, Vol.205, No.2 (2016), p.23.
30. On the emigration of Iranian Jews to Israel, I refer the reader to Alessandra Cecolin, *Iranian Jews in Israel: Between Persian Cultural Identity and Israeli Nationalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
31. Enzo Traverso, *L'histoire comme champ de bataille. Interpréter les violences du XXème siècle* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2011).
32. Bensoussan, *Jews*, p.5.
33. For an overview, see Andrea L. Smith (ed.), *Europe's Invisible Migrants* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003).
34. Sarah Stein, 'Black Holes, Dark Matter, and Buried Troves: Decolonization and the Multi-Sited Archives of Algerian Jewish History', *American Historical Review*, Vol.120, No.3 (2015), p.915.
35. See Danny Trom, *La France sans les Juifs* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2019).
36. Jacques Revel (ed.), *Jeux d'échelles: la micro-analyse à la preuve de l'expérience* (Paris: Seuil, 1996).
37. Lior Sternfeld and Menashe Anzi, 'Israel Is Rewriting the History of Middle Eastern Jews For Propaganda', *Ha-Aretz*, 1 December 2019, available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-israel-is-rewriting-the-history-of-middle-eastern-jews-for-propaganda-1.8196808>.